



Wiktionary

Dictionaries

Every living, written language needs to have a dictionary, and it needs to have a living literature in production, and readers of that literature.

The vital question of the literature, and the readership of the literature in a given language, is one that we will return to, towards the end of this course.

The dictionary serves the literature. The dictionary we are referring to is the kind that PanSALB calls a “monolingual explanatory dictionary”, so as to distinguish it from bilingual dictionaries, which serve the purpose of translation from one language to another. Such dictionaries are invariably in two halves, e.g. Khosa-English/English-Xhosa.

We will return to the important question of translation in the next part. Let it suffice for now to note that the existence of

translation dictionaries is a double-edged sword. On the one side it brings a language into cognisance by different language speakers, and so makes it accessible to more readers and speakers. But on the other side, bilingual dictionaries open the less advantaged language up to domination by the more powerful language. The consequence can be that the intellectuals of an African language-group, for example, can be drawn off into the pool of the other and in particular colonial language, such as English, for example.

Further, the commonality of English (or Afrikaans) as the other language in the bilingual dictionaries of the nine indigenous official languages keeps the colonisers' languages in the position of mediating between the indigenous languages. The publication of, say, a Zulu-Venda / Venda-Zulu dictionary seems a long way away, but until such dictionaries are available, the literary relationship between those two languages will continue to be passed through the cultural filter of English, at least to some extent, to the disadvantage of the two African languages.

The safety of a language cannot be secured by the mere existence of bilingual dictionaries. There has to be a dictionary of the language, in the language itself - the kind that PanSALB calls a "monolingual explanatory dictionary". And it has to be kept up to date with the development of the language, so that it is a transmitter of that development to all the language-speakers, writers and readers.

In a later part of this course we will look at the example of Kiswahili, at its outstanding success as an international language, and at the history of Kiswahili-Kiswahili dictionaries, which several generations ago superseded the bilingual translation dictionaries that the Christian missionaries had originally created.

PanSALB outsourced its central task

The case for the creation of a monolingual explanatory dictionary for each of the nine indigenous official languages is incontrovertible. If these languages are to survive, it must be done, and done quickly. Therefore it is PanSALB's job. PanSALB has outsourced this job to nine "National Lexicography Units" (NLUs) located in academic institutions. These are "Section 29" not-for-profit companies, dispersed around the country, and there is no trace of their names and contact details on the PanSALB web site.

More to the point, **there are no** (monolingual) **dictionaries**. None. There are rumours of a Zulu one, and rumours of a Venda one, but so far, no reference, name, publisher, vendor, price, or anything. All information to the contrary will be gratefully received by the Communist University.

Why Wiktionary?

Dictionaries are registers of words in use. The only source of words in use is the users, who are the speakers, writers and readers of the language.

It follows that the creation of a dictionary has to be a mass project, which cannot in practice be effected by obscure and little-known initiatives such as PanSALB's "NLUs".

[Wiktionary](#) is an existing Internet structure that is available, free, to anyone wanting to enter a mass, collaborative project to compile a dictionary in any language.

Wiktionary is a well-organised form of “crowdsourcing”. The [Wikipedia entry on crowdsourcing](#) in fact describes dictionary-compilation as a classical form of crowdsourcing. For example, it says:

“The [Oxford English Dictionary](#) (OED) may provide one of the earliest examples of [crowdsourcing](#). An open call was made to the community for contributions by volunteers to identify all words in the English language and provide example quotations of their usages for each one. They received over 6 million submissions over a period of 70 years.”

Wiktionaries of South African languages already exist. They are listed in this table:

NLU	Wiktionary URL
Zulu	http://zu.wiktionary.org/wiki/Ikhasi_Elikhulu
Xhosa	http://xh.wiktionary.org/wiki/Iphepha_Elingundoqo
Afrikaans	http://af.wiktionary.org/wiki/Tuisblad
English	http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/
Northern Sotho	No wiktionary yet [start one]
Tswana	http://tn.wiktionary.org/wiki/Tsebe_ya_konokono
Sotho	http://st.wiktionary.org/wiki/Main_Page
Tsonga	http://ts.wiktionary.org/wiki/Tlukankulu
Swati	http://ss.wiktionary.org/wiki/Likhasi_Lelikhulu
Venda	No wiktionary yet [start one]
Ndebele	No wiktionary yet [start one]

So why is PanSALB not promoting these Wiktionary projects?

Wiktionary is part of the family of collaborative projects that includes Wikipedia, which is one of the most-visited sites in the whole world. All of these projects are created by, and maintained

by volunteers.

With a Wiktionary project, the dictionary is being published as it is being created. Users can have the benefit of the work, long before it is ready for publication in hard-copy form (if that form is even considered necessary). It may actually prove to be very difficult to publish hard-copy dictionaries, even if there is a will. The languages should not be held hostage for the sake of this semi-obsolete form of publication, as desirable as it may be to have such hard-copy works.

The Communist University would like to hear from anyone who has been assisting in the compilation of South African, or other African-language Wiktionaries.

- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here](#).